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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000164

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SUBJECT: EARLY ELECTIONS? GOVERNMENT LAYING GROUNDWORK

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Daniel Shields, Reason: 1.4(b/d)

11. (C) Summary: Fueling rumors of early polls, the Government of Singapore (GOS) is executing the procedural steps that will allow it to call a general election at will. Political observers here speculate that the People's Action Party (PAP) may be keen to hold an early election (which must otherwise take place no later than February 2012) to secure a new five-year mandate before the worst of the economic crisis starts to pinch voters. Opposition parties are just waking up to this possibility and appear unprepared to mount an effective challenge to PAP hegemony. End summary.

12. (C) The longer the economic crisis drags on, the more incentive the dominant People's Action Party (PAP) has to instigate an early election, political observer Gillian Koh (protect) told PolOff. The GOS is closely watching events in the United States to gauge whether the Obama Administration's economic stimulus package will lead to an early economic recovery; should the slump appear likely to continue through 2010, the GOS will almost certainly call an early election, Koh said.

#### PAP Government Controls Electoral Timetable

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13. (U) If the GOS makes the necessary logistical preparations in advance, it can mount an election on roughly two weeks notice. The current Parliament's five-year term will end in November 2011, requiring a new election no later than February 2012. Singapore's president can, however, dissolve Parliament at any time on the advice of the prime minister, paving the way for an early election. After dissolving Parliament, the president fixes a date for the nomination of new parliamentary candidates; this "Nomination Day" may fall as soon as five days after the president's announcement. Singapore traditionally holds its elections close to nine days after Nomination Day, the shortest period allowed by the elections law. (Note: Although the campaign period may last up to a month, this has not happened in any recent election. End note)

#### Election Prerequisites Falling Rapidly into Place

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14. (SBU) By carrying out the necessary administrative steps, the GOS has almost positioned itself to call an election at will. It announced on February 17 that the Elections Department was revising the electoral registers, in keeping with a law that requires such an update no later than three years after the last general election. The same day, the GOS published in its official gazette the final text of a recent law amending voting procedures for Singaporeans overseas. (Note: The GOS drew criticism by canceling overseas voting for security reasons in the 2001 general election, which took

place shortly after the 9/11 attacks; the new law is intended to ensure that overseas Singaporeans can vote.) Next, the GOS released a 144-page notice on February 18 revising the boundaries of the polling districts within the existing constituencies. Goh Jin Xian, Manager of Public Education and Training in the Elections Department, told PolOff February 19 that if the GOS chooses not to alter the existing constituency boundaries, then the current revision of the electoral registers is the last required step before calling an election. The Elections Department expects to finish the revision by the first week in March, Goh said.

#### Singapore's Crisis Budget: A Political Manifesto?

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15. (SBU) The GOS has also used the annual budget aggressively to position itself for a potential early election. Since dramatically unveiling its 2009 budget a month earlier than usual, the GOS has trumpeted the U.S. \$13.67 billion "Resilience Package" as Singapore's decisive response to the global economic crisis. The budget includes tax rebates for households and other measures to help businesses keep workers on the payroll. The GOS also highlighted its first-ever decision to tap the country's fiscal reserves - long characterized as the country's "rainy day" fund - up to U.S. \$3.27 billion to fund the crisis budget. The government-influenced local press has devoted an extraordinary amount of coverage to the tapping of the reserves and Parliament's budget debate, highlighting the government's quick action to help Singaporeans hard-hit by the current downturn.

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#### Opposition Unready

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16. (C) Singapore's political opposition appears largely unprepared for a general election campaign. As recently as six weeks ago, contacts from three of the six active opposition parties were reporting to PolOff that they believed an early election was unlikely. At an opposition public forum in early February, not one politician or supporter even mentioned the possibility of an early election. Ng Teck Siong, a veteran oppositionist and chairman of the Reform Party, told PolOff February 24 that he now expects the GOS to call an election in 2009, most likely between May and July. Ng said his party will try to contest one or two Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs, which require a party to field a slate of 5 or 6 candidates) and one or two Single Member Constituencies (SMCs); he acknowledged, however, that the party has done basic preparatory work in only one GRC and has not even decided whom to put forward as candidates there. (Note: Parliament currently has 84 elected members from 23 constituencies, of which 14 are GRCs and 9 are SMCs.)

17. (C) Comment: The GOS has a history of generating favorable coverage in the local press before officially announcing a policy or decision. There has been a noticeable uptick in articles devoted to the possibility of an early election, though writers argue both for and against it. Recent history also suggests that the GOS's carefully orchestrated response to the economic crisis may be a harbinger of an early election. The last external event that worried the GOS as much as the current crisis was the events of September 11, 2001. Two months after those attacks, the PAP won a snap election with over 75 percent of the vote. End comment.

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